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Book Reviews

BODY TALK

Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, eds
The Body: A Reader
London: Routledge, 2005, 348 pp., ISBN 0–415–34008-X

Vivian Sobchack
Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Culture
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 328 pp., ISBN 0–520–24129–0

These are two very different books; one addressing a student, teaching and learning audience and the other representing an original approach to the body and visual culture. However, they are also complementary and there is a strong case for using *The Body* to contextualize the critique in *Carnal Thoughts*, especially if you are not very familiar with some of the background to recent developments in the field and, in particular, with phenomenological approaches to embodiment. Vivian Sobchack's work, albeit with a different agenda, also presents a focus on some of the dimensions of embodiment that are underplayed in *The Body*, especially in relation to gendered difference, the overobjectification of the body and material corporeality.

The Body is an edited collection, which covers some 'classic' texts as well as some more recent contributions to the field that are fast achieving 'classic' status. This book is avowedly, as its subtitle states, a Reader, which would make a valuable teaching resource. However, the range of material covered makes it far from being just a worthy textbook. The extracts included cover seminal texts, such as those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Marcel Mauss, Michel Foucault and Mary Douglas and key theoretical underpinnings, such as Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler, empirical work such as Beverley Skeggs's work on class and embodiment and some lively, even idiosyncratic exchanges, such as the dialogue between Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, which engages with the key tension in debates about bodies and identity between essentialism and constructivism.

Phenomenological approaches are reasonably well represented given the current interest in embodiment, although I would have liked more Merleau-Ponty, as the extract included here is quite brief. The extract from Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice* usefully focuses on his contribution to an understanding of embodiment through the concept of *illusio*, incorporating this encounter between his notion of the field and the *habitus*. However, I think students might need further explication as well as some critical analysis to position it within the broader picture. This is challenging material at this point and, I think, at several through the book, where there are assumptions made about how familiar the reader will be with the

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material covered. This is a dilemma, as the editors have clearly sought to cover as wide a range as possible, but, just occasionally, they sacrifice depth for breadth.

The book engages with some of the big issues, organized in eight sections, starting with the question 'what is a body?' in Part 1. This is used to raise issues about the dualisms, such as mind/body, nature/culture, essentialism/constructivism and myriad others, that haunt all analyses of the body and embodiment. The next section includes several of the classic texts that form an important part of this book. Although the book's introduction promises extensive introductions to each of the eight parts that make up the Reader, I wondered if there has been enough explanation in these sections, since considerable assumptions are made about the reader's prior familiarity with the debates.

I particularly enjoyed the discussion of bodies and identity in Part 3, especially for its focus on the transgression of boundaries, including disciplinary boundaries, which is a most welcome feature of this book. Identity formation is located within the terrain of representation with some useful extracts from key texts, with Barbara Creed's and Judith Butler's work being really good examples.

No text on the body could fail to address the matter of 'normality' and Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco have made some interesting choices of extracts that address the debates and encompass recent developments in exploring monstrosity, which have particular resonance for the exploration of embodied discourses of gender, racialization and disability.

Scientific discourse pervades the book in a variety of guises. It is not confined to the section on health and disease, which is usefully followed by Part 6, on bodies and technology, which most appropriately starts with Donna Haraway. There could have been more on her understanding of technoscience and perhaps some more recent discussion of the developments in critical thinking on feminism and science arising out of Haraway's work. However, the extract chosen offers useful background material on cyborg thinking. Maybe a more up-to-date collection might have moved beyond cyborgs into new ways of thinking through technologies, but the background is important here. The discussion of consumer culture and the body, while featuring some key extracts, one of the best being from Marilyn Strathern, is curiously disembodied, an aspect which re-emerges at several points, perhaps inevitably since so much recent work has focused upon inscription and the discursive production of meaning about the body, often at the expense of analyses of difference. Part 7 has the largely objectified body of representational systems as its focus, although concern with racialization is especially valuable in this section, for example as introduced through Anne McClinock's work on commodity racism.

The Body is a really useful set of extracts mapping out the field of thinking about – and through – the body. It succeeds in both problematizing the field and providing interesting material for the reader who might be relatively new to this area of study. The authors also provide some well-explained suggestions for further reading. There are omissions, for example in covering psychosocial approaches and the psychic dimensions of embodiment and I would have liked to have seen some reference to body-focused theories of difference such as Luce Irigaray's, but editors have to make choices and overall Fraser and Greco have made very helpful ones.

This is not an overtly feminist text or one located explicitly in the field of women's studies, unlike Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick's (1999) *Feminist Theory and the Body*, which I would think of as the nearest competitor, although Londa Schiebinger's (2000) edited collection, *Feminism and the Body*, which presents classic essays in feminist body studies also covers some work in this field.

However, it may be a tribute to the success of feminist interventions and feminist scholarship that *The Body*, while drawing extensively on feminist research does not have to so categorize itself. I hope so.

Carnal Thoughts is a very different book. Vivian Sobchack has written a most engaging series of essays that bring together a most diverse range of experiences, personal, embodied in – and through – all senses, cinematic, visual, narrative, mythological, textual and scholarly, all of which are marshalled to argue for the claim that we are material beings. People are not only located in texts and technologies, but in a body, in flesh that nonetheless has transcendent possibilities. She uses transcendency to encompass people's sense of beauty and of ethical values – that is of the sense of obligation to others. This range of illustrative material is deployed not only to expand upon and make meaningful Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, but also to develop a theory of the gendered body that foregrounds sense, senses, the visual and visible, which is conceptualized in her notion of *interobjectivity*. This book may look difficult but it is not. It is really accessible overall. Sobchack demonstrates really well the practicalities of the claim that body and consciousness are irreducible. We make sense of things and of ourselves through our bodies as well as through what is called consciousness. In this book, she expresses most passionately her argument that the things and other people in the world are bound to us in the body and we share a reality and materiality that really matters.

The essays in the book are divided into two parts, 'Sensible Scenes' and 'Responsible Visions', both of which have an embodied and, as one would expect with Sobchack and her previous work on cinema, a visual, representational component. In the first section, she focuses on some of the problems of embodiment, which she argues can only be resolved by incorporating all the senses and by bringing feeling into the analysis of experience, showing how carnal thoughts make sense of the subjective and the objective. This is illustrated in her essay 'What my Fingers Knew', where she discusses the *cinesthetic* subject of the sensate body in the film experience, citing the opening scene in Jane Campion's film *The Piano* in which the viewer (Sobchack) sees Ada's fingers as if they were her own – '"mine" as well as the image's' (p. 63). This sets the context of the experience that is also illustrated in another scene in which Baines, who is clearly sexually attracted to Ada, is watching her playing the piano. Baines touches Ada's skin through a hole in her stocking. Sobchack describes her own response as a spectator, as felt in her own body, but also in the bodies of Ada and Baines and even the film's 'body'. She thus situates subjectivity in the lived body.

In the second part of the book, she is more explicit about her polemical project to challenge theories of the body as text, which marginalize or obscure the pain and vulnerability of the body. She focuses most powerfully on the lived body, with the narrative of her own experience of cancer surgery, the loss of a limb and subsequently of having a prosthetic left leg, threading through the essays in the book. This personal experience is central to many of her essays in the second part of the book and is foundational in her essay 'A Leg to Stand On', which makes a particularly strong case for the interconnection between subjectivity and objectivity, although, in the best feminist tradition of eliding the personal and the political, she draws upon personal, embodied experience throughout the book.

Her reflections are often humorous, especially in the stories she tells about the instability of the images one has of oneself, made more manifest through the ageing process. In what seems to be a predominantly visual culture, she reflects on the prevalence of cosmetic surgery and the tension, not only between being seen and seeing ourselves but between seeing, being seen and *feeling*. This

illustrates her claim, made most clearly in the context of cinematic representations, that we live in a visible rather than a visual culture. This is demonstrated by her retelling of a joke about a 75-year-old woman who is visited by God and told she has 35 years left to live. With this promised longevity in mind she decides to have extensive cosmetic surgery so that she can live looking good as well as for a long time. Sadly, on the day she leaves the clinic she is run over and killed. When she meets God at the pearly gates and asks why the promise of long life was not fulfilled, He says, 'I didn't recognize you' (p. 38). Cosmetic surgery might mean that others do not recognize us, but Sobchack is keen to stress the greater fear that we might not recognize ourselves. She links stories of her own experience with other narratives and texts, such as films that substantiate what might otherwise appear ephemeral or too specific. Stories of all sorts are central to her approach. Sobchack defends her use of the everyday and of stories, for example using Paul Ricoeur's discussion of the narratives of ordinary lives. She uses the vibrancy of popular texts and the vitality of everyday stories to good effect in these essays. There is even a nice, circular, everyday (even though it features in a dream) story of getting lost told by Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which she retells in the essay 'Breadcrumbs in the Forest', to illustrate the relationship between 'getting lost' and 'going round in circles'. Scholarly stories and everyday stories about bodies in space and time elide throughout this book.

Merleau-Ponty's arguments are at one level obvious in that we are our bodies, yet at another, especially as developed within existential phenomenology, they are obtuse and difficult to grasp; to flesh out perhaps. This is Sobchack's project. She has some brilliant illustrations, which make existential phenomenology not only clearer but push forward an understanding of bodies that takes on the inter-relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. Sobchack's stated aim is to redress the objectification of the body in so much recent work, which is illustrated in *The Body*. This approach might be seen as drawing upon a more philosophical approach to the illustration of argument and *Carnal Thoughts* is a diversely ranging interdisciplinary work. Using methods guided by existential phenomenology, Sobchack goes beyond seeing and understanding the body as a text or a machine and reinstates the corporeal that is the fleshy foundations of subjectivity. This is difficult to do, but I think she is successful because she incorporates such a wide range of illustrative material into her analysis. This not only makes the book a pleasure to read, as she makes very complex theoretical material accessible, but also, the personal narratives are what make it possible to demonstrate the aspects of embodiment, visible and visual, sensate and feeling, which she seeks to embrace.

Many of her examples have particular resonance, and I think that the personal narrative, for example in biographical details such as childhood experience as well as her experience of the prosthetic limb, often works better than the cinematic examples, although these are often more carefully worked through theoretically. This is a very ambitious book and at points the strengths of the illustrative material might also be a weakness, given the extent and eclectic nature of different narratives that are threaded through the book. There is a danger that the weight of personal experience might be troubling in its specificities. However, I think that Sobchack succeeds because she is explicit in stating the aims of her project and in the support which she draws upon in making her case. This book is a most enjoyable read and a useful counter to the overobjectification of the body as well as the overemphasis on constructivism and even disembodiedness that pervades so much of contemporary body talk.

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RETHINKING RELIGION/REWRITING DIVINITY

Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon, eds
Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives
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Religion in French Feminist Thought should be essential reading for anyone who is concerned with the nature of religion and the contributions that women's writings on sexual difference in particular offer to this contemporary concern. This is also a highly significant text in drawing out and bringing together French thinking on religion, which can be constructive in redefining the central topics related to divinity. Love, life, birth, death, desire, sexual difference and human/divine oppositions come into their own as central topics for rethinking religion in this edited volume of essays. But these would be difficult and dense topics for the readers without the seriously impressive critical work on 'religion in French feminist thought' done by the contributors to this volume: Ellen T. Armour, Charlotte Berkowitz, Amy Hollywood, Luce Irigaray, Grace M. Jantzen, Morny Joy, Mary L. Keller, Dawne McCance, Kathleen O'Grady, Erika Ostrovsky, Judith L. Poxon, Martha J. Reineke, Sal Renshaw and Marie-Andree Roy each take up a new form of thinking on religion – rewriting divinity is one of their implicit goals.

Not only do these contributors meet the critical challenge of rendering accessible what has been described as 'French feminist' thought to both informed and uninformed readers, they confront the unstable dimension of religion in French psycholinguistic writings on divinity. The case for unearthing the productive side of psycholinguistic conceptions of topics related to divinity and the role of religion in human lived experiences is made persuasively in the course of this collection of essays. But this is despite the deep ambivalence on religion also apparent in the primary texts of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Catherine Clement and Monique Wittig – on whom the volume focuses critically. The earlier published companion volume, *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader* (Routledge, 2002), also edited by Joy, O'Grady and Poxon, includes religiously significant excerpts from the writings of each of these women who write in French on religion.

Overall, the serious challenge confronted in the present volume of critical perspectives is addressed in various ways, some more polemical (e.g. Jantzen), others more textual-contextual (e.g. Joy), still others mainly exegetical with careful and clear exposition of concepts. Each is full of original ideas. Such a rich volume is not easy to cover adequately in a book review. The reviewer can only give a taste of the goods on offer and the material for digestion. In addition to focusing upon writings in French by women who each raise gendered questions about the nature of religion, the focus of any reviewer must be informed about the common ground